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ABSTRACT

The substitute teacher's public image was investigated by means of an informal survey of part-time and full-time teachers in Washington. Survey results revealed that working conditions appeared to be the largest factor in damaging the self-image of most substitute teachers. The majority of full-time teachers and administrators surveyed were unaware of substitute teachers' problems and contended that substitute teachers were valued as emergency personnel. Suggestions for improving the self-image of substitute teachers included: orientation programs; positive self-talk; redefinition of goals (on the part of substitute teachers); and socialization with other teachers. (Author/CB)

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Substitute Teachers: The Professional Contradiction

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ABSTRACT

The substitute teacher's public image is investigated via an informal survey conducted among part-time and full-time teachers attending evening classes at Eastern Washington University. Survey results reveal some profound contradictions. Their working conditions appear to damage the self-image of most substitute teachers. The majority of full-time teachers and administrators are unaware of problems confronting substitute teachers and contend that substitutes are valued as emergency personnel. Some of the suggestions for resolving these issues come directly from the survey participants and others from the personal experiences of the authors.

SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS: THE PROFESSIONAL CONTRADICTION

Every school district, regardless of its size, employs substitute teachers during the school year. Students are taught by substitutes for an average of seven to ten days per school year (Kraft, 1980; Drake, 1981). Five to six percent of the students' instructional time is spent with substitutes. It is easy to see, then, that substitute teachers are an important part of the educational team and should be valued as such. But are they? How do substitute teachers see themselves? How do full time teachers regard their substitute counterparts? What about student reactions?

To explore these questions, the Council for Educational Issues from the Department of Education at Eastern Washington University, recently conducted an informal survey among substitute and full time teachers attending classes at Eastern. The purpose was to compare their perceptions of themselves with their perceptions of each other as professionals. Their responses painted a surprising picture of contradictions.

Substitute Teachers Respond

When asked about their professional image, about half of the substitute teachers responded that they saw themselves as

professional educators. The other 50% described themselves as fill-ins, strangers, outsiders, entertainers and a necessary evil.

Substitute teachers were more unanimous in their responses regarding student reactions. Over 70% believed that students treated them as someone "to take advantage of". Some thought students viewed substitute teachers as babysitters, policemen or even as someone "less than human".

While a few of those interviewed believed that full time teachers regarded substitutes as professional colleagues, over 75% shared less positive opinions. Many felt other teachers considered substitutes less capable, unable to get a regular position, or as having an easy job with less responsibility. At least two of the substitutes said they had been greeted by other staff members with, "And who are you today?". "That makes me feel like a nobody," they added.

Substitute teachers saw administrators as indifferent to them. As long as they showed up in time, substitutes felt they were treated as temporary help, fill-ins or ignored all together. One substitute believed administrators just wanted "someone in the classroom", but did not care who.

A summary of the survey's responses by substitute teachers reflects a strongly negative attitude. Half of those interviewed expressed a poor self-image. Three-quarters of the substitutes felt others thought poorly of them as well.

Full Time Teachers Answer

When the same questionnaire was completed by full-time teachers, a different picture emerged. The majority of full-time educators regarded substitute teachers as capable, qualified, professional, and successful at completing a particularly difficult job. These same teachers believed that substitutes held similar opinions of themselves. Full-time staff asserted that most administrators appreciated substitute teachers and tried to make them feel welcome. Concerning student reactions to substitute teachers, both teacher groups agreed that students treat substitute teachers with less respect than their full-time counterparts.

What is the Problem?

The obvious conflict between the responses of these two groups of professionals leads to several questions. What is there about substitute teaching that leads to feelings of inadequacy and isolation? How can these problems be alleviated? What can substitutes do to improve their self perceptions? How can full-time teachers and administrators help?

The job of substitute teaching comes with certain built-in difficulties. After the district secretary calls with the school address and daily assignment, the substitute teacher must get to

the right room in the right building at the right time. Routine procedural matters such as lunch count, attendance and daily bulletins help to complicate the process.

Usually called on short notice, substitutes have little time to prepare for instruction and must rely heavily on the lesson plans left by the full time teacher. These vary from a page number without a book title to detailed scripts with individual student objectives. In either case, the substitute teacher's own bag of tricks may be a reasonable alternative.

The title of substitute teacher describes another problem area: personal identity. A substitute is never quite as good as the real thing, whether we are talking about sugar, salt, or teachers. No one likes to be thought of as a substitute anything, not even a professional substitute. Although changing such a commonly used word as "sub" will be difficult, the term "interim" teacher is a much more descriptive title and it does not carry any of the stigma associated with substitutions.

Feelings of isolation surfaced as a consistent problem on the Council's questionnaire. Unless a substitute can return to the same school regularly, he or she is unlikely to have many friends in the workplace. Many substitutes prefer to lunch in their classrooms rather than face the lunch crowd in the teachers' room.

What about evaluation? How do substitute teachers get an administrator to see their best work? These teachers are often

called upon to teach out of their area of preparation. Just imagine being called upon to demonstrate two methods of attaching a shirt collar if your major was life sciences. The demands of substitute teaching call for great flexibility and a strong sense of self, but the conditions of substitute teaching reinforce neither of these qualities.

Making the Job More Rewarding

Full-time teachers, administrators and substitute teachers, themselves, can all contribute to solving the problems inherent in substitute teaching. Some of the following suggestions come directly from those teachers who participated in the Council for Educational Issues survey and others from the personal experiences of the authors. Perhaps these ideas will spawn still more suggestions among our readers.

A substitute teacher's guide would help new substitutes cope with the routine procedural matters of any school more efficiently. This guide might include maps of both the school district and each building, with the teachers' room and bathrooms circled in red. Bell schedules, class schedules, class lists, sample attendance and lunch count slips (with directions) should be enclosed. Be creative. How about an attractive name tag and an invitation to lunch in the teacher's room? Substitute teachers' guides have great potential for assisting substitute

teachers' to adjustment to unfamiliar surroundings. They will only be useful if there is time to read them, however.

A recurring suggestion for substitute teachers from the survey participants was early arrival. Preparation time seemed to be very important for successful substitute teaching. A brief school orientation, given by the principal, or her designee, over coffee and roll, would provide substitute teachers with both an encouraging welcome and time to review the substitute teachers' guide.

A district orientation held early each year and specifically designed for part time teachers would be an excellent opportunity for this special support staff and administrators to meet each other. District policies pertaining to part time certificated staff could be reviewed and questions answered. Evaluation procedures could be discussed and substitute teachers should be given an opportunity to ask questions of building principals.

Substitute teachers "should be" encouraged to share their experiences and create a body of successful curriculum ideas. Following previously prepared lesson plans must still be first priority, but the substitute should be encouraged to use her own collection of short lesson ideas in case her skill will not allow her to follow the plan or the plan is so sketchy as to be undecipherable. These short, self-contained lessons might provide principals an opportunity to see substitutes at their very best and provide substitute teachers a way in which to prepare for evaluation.

Walking Tall

The lion's share of responsibility for improving any substitute teacher's self-image must fall on the substitute herself. To begin, full-time teachers suggest assuming an air of confidence, even if it feels somewhat awkward. By practicing a confident, assured attitude, substitutes are more likely to assimilate these qualities.

Positive self-talk is a powerful tool for substitute teachers. The majority of our self-talk is negative, reinforcing a poor self-image and low self-esteem. This is a serious problem for substitute teachers, but fortunately solutions are available. Writing a list of ten positive self-statements and reading them aloud is a simple but effective way to begin turning low self-esteem into personal power. Positive self-talk will not dispel anxiety, but it will provide an effective tool for coping.

Socializing on an equal basis with the other teachers in the building will help relieve those feelings of isolation and give full-time staff a chance to appreciate the substitute teacher's experiences. "Who are you today?" may simply be a conversation opener: try to avoid unnecessary defensiveness.

Research regarding the effects of teacher expectation on student achievement is as applicable to substitute teachers as it is to full-time teachers. What we expect is usually what we get,

regardless of the time frame. Expecting quality work and exemplary behavior is appropriate professional behavior for any teacher.

Successful substitute teachers also suggest redefining the idea of success and emphasizing short term goals. Just establishing rapport quickly can be a gratifying accomplishment. Part-time teachers can also offer a fresh approach to old material. One participant had a specialty lesson about place value which she enjoyed sharing. Don't be afraid to do your best. Sometimes a full-time teacher can be threatened by an inspirational substitute, but good teachers always appreciate and learn from each other. Writing a detailed summary of the day is particularly helpful for seeing exactly what has been accomplished, both for the substitute teacher and the returning teacher.

District orientations should stress the idea that substitute teachers provide a very specific service to the district, the learning process and the students. This role should not be seen as some substandard fill-in, but as emergency personnel covering, on short notice, the full responsibilities of the classroom.

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